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Leadership Competency Series

Becoming top performer with 'Tipping

HOW does an employee become a top performer? What is the secret of top performance? Is there a technique or a competency, if practiced well, makes you a star performer? What differentiates top performers from average ones?

It is not a difficult task to spot top performers in any organisation. They can be identified quickly with ease than naming poor performers. In one of the organization, say in ABC Limited., they had inducted 100 field sales officers to operate in four of their business regions. All of them were campus hires recruited through a structured selection process. Moving on, after three years, around 15 of them succeeded the rest through their outstanding performance, assessed by sales numbers and customer base expansion. Their names got in to corporate succession planning list as they displayed potential to become regional managers.

Cookies and the Cooks

These 15 outstanding sales officers were interviewed to know the behaviours that caused their superior performance. The sales officers were given same set of competencies that was developed for sales function and mapped for sales officers in the job band. The difference, we found, however was in application of the competencies in their day to jobs. Top performers displayed appropriate mix of competencies through their individual, specific behaviours and most importantly, they continued, stretching beyond a point, above which other average performers stopped to move further. While exercising a competency such as "perseverance", the high performers balanced it by applying the competency called "interpersonal savvy" and while stretching out on their "functional competencies". It got balanced with "negotiation skills" indeed. Interestingly they precisely varied these combinations by understanding needs and moods of their customers and prospects in given situations.

How different are superior performers from others? They do something different. They simultaneously use a mix of competencies in varied degrees. The stretch beyond a normal rule and guideline and try to reach a melting point, putting their best. They take some calculated risks to rise to the peak. What works here is the assumption they make for themselves about what has to be achieved. "Assumptions affect observation; observation breeds conviction; conviction produces experience, experience generates behaviour, which in turn confirm assumptions!" Behavioural Indicators can be observed behind the superior performers which are caused by individual internal force. In the case referred above, all the 100 sales officers had some what similar intellectual

and knowledge background, challenges and experience. But the results they achieved were different. As Edward Deming puts it, “Experience teaches us nothing. If experience teaches us something, why are we in such a mess?” The ingredients which are used to make delicious cookies and the process of making them is same. But cookies are different. They taste different because of the Cook! The magic of that action is caused by the competency which is individualistic.

Moment of catalysis

Professor David McClelland of Harvard, found that the cause for top performance is not just one competency. It is the combination that creates the result. Top performers have capabilities using a mix of competencies, as superior performance is caused by a cluster of competencies and not by a single trait or capability. Top performers draw up competencies from different dimensions, which include “the main purpose of self/organisation”, “self knowledge/development”, “impact and influence on people” “following the right processes” and “Learning/perfecting to improve continuously”. All these competencies mix together and display in a competency such as Influence or Initiative. They use a mix of competencies and reach a critical mass and McClelland calls this as the “Tipping Point”. “This is something akin to a chemical reaction achieving the moment of catalysis.” (Daniel Goleman - Working with Emotional Intelligence). “Once a person reaches the ‘Tipping Point’, performance shoots up. The critical point may be due to how frequently you show the key competencies, or your level of sophistication in them, or how well you manifest them. At PepsiCo, those executives who had reached the tipping point - possessing strength in at least six competencies from across the entire spectrum, were far more likely to perform in the top third as reflected in salary bonuses for performance of the division led. Of those leaders who were strong in six or seven competencies, 87 percent were in the top third.” (Hay/Mcber studies of IBM and PepsiCo executives - referenced by David Goleman). The study also reveals the competencies that most often led to the level of success which are: initiative, achievement drive, adaptability, influence, team leadership, political awareness, empathy, self-confidence and developing others.

High performing mangers and leaders use competencies of different dimensions, in a right mix and proportion to become successful. It is this versatility, which generates catalysis. Competency clusters are groups of competencies. Clusters are developed in a customised situation as required by relevant objectives of organisations. As business situations are specific and distinct, it is difficult to suggest a “general cluster”, which can be applied to any organisation. However, at a macro level, managers and leaders need to possess competencies in four or five dimensions.

Competencies – Five P Model

“Lominger Inc.” has grouped leadership competencies into four clusters of purpose, person, people and process.

Most of the competencies can be put into these four clusters to form a “Balance Score Card of competencies”. In my study and approach on this topic, I noticed that some leadership competencies stand out of these four categories and those can be put into an additional one, which I would like to call as the cluster of “Perfection”.

'Purpose' cluster of competencies help mangers and leaders to create, communicate mission/vision to chart long-term goals. These competencies drive us towards an end in the mind, to manage a strategic mission. Result orientation, managing vision, decision quality, and political savvy are some of the competencies of this cluster.

“Person” cluster of competencies focus on self-awareness and self-management. This cluster incidentally is the first of five Emotional Intelligence Clusters as grouped by Daniel Goleman.

Competencies in the “People” cluster such as “Building Teams”, “People Relationship”, “Motivating others” are useful to work with individuals, teams and to manage and energise others.

“Process” competencies help us in managing various processes of organisations. Planning and prioritising, TQM, re-engineering, six sigma are some of the process competencies. Perfection as I believe is a journey towards refinement and the sharpening never stops. Also, there is no end state of perfection. It is like continuous link between pedaling and movement of a bicycle. In order to move while riding, a cyclist must continue to push the pedals. If pedaling stops, wheels come to halt resulting fall of cyclist. The “perfection” we refer here, is related to a predefined expectation and not an end state where, all is fine-tuned leaving no scope for improvement. I consider the competencies such as “decision making”, “continuous improvement (kaizen)”, “proactive power”, and “Resilience” to fit into the fifth cluster “perfection.”

Managerial and leadership competency selection is one of the key steps in competency mapping. While grouping competencies for different levels of managerial bandwidth, it is necessary to select competencies having dimension varieties among the Five P clusters: Purpose, People, Person, Process and Perfection. The 5P model brings a balance in competency development of executives, managers and leaders to reach a tipping point.

The “Tipping Point” is not set-aside for only top-level leaders. It is applicable to all most all categories of jobs in organisations. To perform a job to a superior degree, to accomplish something superb, Job Holder must reach the Tipping Point, using competencies from different domains of 5P clusters. For instance, the first person you would meet, when visiting an organisation is “Security Guard”. He has a clear “Purpose” of protecting the interests of his organisation. He displays “People” competency being courteous to you and “Personal” competency in terms of his communication and capability. He will make suitable entries using the “Process” competencies and can develop himself to a “Security Officer” sharpening his “Perfection” competencies. A successful Security Guard uses 5P competencies to reach his “Tipping Point” and the framework is applicable whether a Job Holder is a Doorman or a Chairman.